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C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

28 October 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Possible Soviet Reactions to an Anti-Castro Coup

SUMMARY

In the event of an anti-Castro coup, there is almost nothing the Soviets could do in Cuba itself to influence the course of events. If the outcome remained in doubt for a time, the USSR would probably confine itself to a show of support, political maneuvering, and propaganda denunciations of the US; we think the chances are considerably better than even that it would not take immediate counteraction against the Allied position in Berlin. East-West relations would deteriorate sharply, but if the detente line had been proving beneficial to Soviet interests, the USSR would keep open the option of returning to it at a later date. If, however, the Soviets were already becoming disenchanted with the detente approach, an anti-Castro coup could be the signal for a general adoption of harsher tactics.

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1. This memorandum examines possible Soviet reactions to a coup against the Castro regime. It considers the contingencies of a coup which succeeds quickly, one which fails quickly, and one which brings on a period of internal armed conflict. All these

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Pages 1-8

GROUP 1

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S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

contingencies would involve the Cuban armed forces to a greater or lesser degree.

General Considerations

2. Despite Castro's heavy dependence on the USSR for economic and military assistance, it has become increasingly obvious that the partnership is unstable and erratic. The Soviets have had little choice but to bear Castro's undisciplined behavior. Their stake in maintaining an avowedly Communist regime is too important for disengagement and Castro is too independent-minded for them to risk massive pressures. The sharp challenge from Communist China that Moscow is unfit to manage a revolutionary policy in the underdeveloped areas makes Castro a key figure in the international Communist movement.

3. Since early 1962, when Castro turned on the old-line Communists and purged one of their key mentors, Anibal Escalante, the Soviets have had no success in creating a viable alternative to Castro. Castro, for his part, has continued his moves to undercut any such Moscow-controlled power base, and has established personal loyalty as the main criterion for advancement. Moreover, the key level of power, the armed forces, has not come under Soviet control.

- 2 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

4. A year ago the size and composition of Soviet forces in Cuba gave the USSR the capability to play a significant military role in a local struggle if it chose to do so. The number of Soviet military personnel currently is an estimated 5,000 to 7,000, most of them technicians and instructors; there are no longer any Soviet ground combat units on the island. At present, the Soviet forces in Cuba probably would not be a significant factor in any internal conflict, except possibly for help in communications and, perhaps, the clandestine flying of Cuban aircraft.^{1/}

The Case of Quick Success

5. The liquidation of Fidel Castro and his regime would present the Soviets with a fairly clear-cut situation. Without Fidel, and without an organized force capable of challenging the coup, the Soviets would conclude that the long struggle with the US over Cuba was lost. Their main concern would be to extricate themselves gracefully and without incident or humiliation. They would probably treat with the new government for some modus vivendi for protecting Soviet personnel and equipment and allowing them to be withdrawn without harassment.

^{1/} The Soviet forces in Cuba almost certainly do not have standing orders which would send them into action automatically, without hearing from Moscow, at the first sign of an attempted coup.

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

6. This is not to say that the overthrow of Castro by anti-Communist forces would not have consequences for Soviet policy. It would be a telling setback; critics of the Soviet leaders would attribute Castro's end to the Soviet backdown of October 1962 and the rapprochement between the US and the USSR. The Soviets might reply by identifying Castro with the Chinese Communists and making the Cuban story an object lesson in the dangers of adventurism and failure to heed Soviet advice. The Soviets would in any case regard it as the result of US machinations. The atmospherics of detente would almost certainly give way, at least for a time, to a campaign of vociferous denunciations.

7. Beyond these manifestations, the overthrow of Castro would be a defeat serious enough to provoke a general reconsideration of Soviet foreign policy tactics. If the Soviets found that a period of extended detente was proving beneficial to their interests, they probably would find ways to limit the resulting deterioration of East-West relations and to retain the option of a later return to the detente line. If, however, they were already becoming disenchanted with the usefulness of this approach, an anti-Castro coup could become the signal for a general reversal of tactics. They would then consider counterdemonstrations against US interests to offset the Cuban loss, but this desire to even the score would be

- 4 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

only one element, and not the decisive one, in the moves involved in returning to a harder line.

The Case of Quick Failure

8. If a coup attempt failed at the outset, the Soviets would probably confine themselves to propaganda charges rather than change their policies toward the West. In Cuba, they might point out to Castro the superior reliability of old-line Communists as opposed to others of his entourage. Castro might react with recriminations against the USSR, attributing US brazenness to the softness of Soviet policy; he would certainly scrutinize what the Soviets had actually done on his behalf during the critical moments.

9. More generally, a coup which did not succeed would bring home to the Soviets the conclusion that the US, even in a period of relaxed tensions, excluded the Cuban question from the framework of detente and was determined, in one way or another, to eliminate Cuban communism. They would understand that this challenge would have to be faced repeatedly, regardless of other aspects of East-West relations.

In Dubious Battle

10. The situation would be different, and the Soviets would be confronted with more choices, if the attempted coup did not achieve

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

quick success but was followed by large-scale fighting between pro- and anti-Castro forces. The Soviets would then face a painful dilemma: they would be constrained to try to save a Communist regime, but would recognize there was little they could do inside Cuba. Soviet inaction would be somewhat less embarrassing if Fidel himself were liquidated at the outset, but this probably would not make a critical difference in Moscow's reaction if proclaimed Castro/Communist elements were able to match the anti-Castro forces for a time.

11. The most important variable in the Soviet calculation would be the USSR's interpretation of US reactions and intentions. In the paragraphs which follow, we assume that US statements and actions give strong evidence of US determination to guarantee the coup's success in fairly short order. To the extent that this were not the case, the Soviets would probably be emboldened to somewhat more vigorous moves in the various spheres of action open to them.

12. Soviet Forces in Cuba: If circumstances permitted, the Soviets would probably make their military equipment available to Castroite forces. There is, however, little left to be turned over, and there might be none by April 1964, when transfer of the SAM system

- 6 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

to Cuban control may have been completed. Soviet pilots could fly missions, but the remaining 20 pilots may be gone by January.

13. Arms Shipments: The Soviets, in asserting their support of the regime, might make public promises of new military shipments. If faced with a US blockade, however, they almost certainly would not attempt to run it. Token air shipments might be made.

14. Protests and Threats: The USSR would almost certainly make vague but ominous threats that US intervention would be followed by Soviet military retaliation. They would be active with condemnations and resolutions at the UN and might propose a UN mission to Havana to secure a cease-fire. Soviet propaganda, in charging a US plot, probably would raise the spectre of some form of retaliatory action against the non-Communist neighbors of the USSR.

15. Counterpressures Elsewhere: The Soviets probably would not expect the foregoing measures to do much more than make a record. They would recognize that only sharp pressures on US positions elsewhere offered any substantial hope of altering US policy and saving their side in Cuba from defeat. The most readily available locale for this move is Berlin, where US commitments and interests are very great. Here, where their overwhelming local strength can be brought to bear quickly and in a variety of ways, each subject to Soviet control,

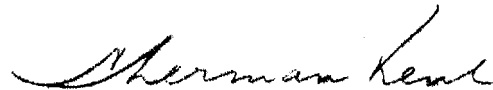
- 7 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

they might seek to convey a sharp warning that West Berlin was a hostage to Cuba. But in October 1962, when the stakes were even higher, the Soviets evidently regarded the risks of a double Cuban-Berlin crisis as too high to entertain, and they made no move whatsoever to bring Berlin into play. This is no guarantee that they would behave in the same way in the circumstances considered here, but we think the chances are considerably better than even that they would not raise a physical challenge in the Berlin area unless they came to believe that US policy seemed irresolute and divided on its next steps.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

- 8 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

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SAS 63-669

10 October 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR: Assistant Director,
National Estimates

ATTENTION: Mr. Sherman KENT

1. We have received the memorandum entitled "The Soviet-Cuban Relationship" (7 October 1963) prepared by your office at our request. This is a useful and very well done memorandum in our view.

2. During the Board discussion of the staff draft of this memorandum it was decided to drop a paragraph which stated that the Soviets would not come to Cuba's assistance in the event that Cuba and the U. S. were to come to blows. The reason for dropping this judgment from the paper was that the subject merited fuller discussion. At that time the Chairman raised the possibility of doing another paper which would consider:

a. The prospects for and the consequences of the Soviets turning the SAM system over to the Cubans; and

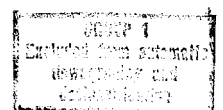
b. The extent to which and the circumstances in which the Soviets might be prepared to back up Cuba in the event of U. S.--Cuban hostilities.

3. These are both questions of great interest to us, and I should think, to the community as a whole. There is another and related question of very great interest to us:

What would the USSR do in the event of an internal uprising in Cuba in which the top echelon of the Castro regime were liquidated, in hiding, or driven to the hills and in which part of the country were controlled by a provisional government set up by the anti-Castro elements?

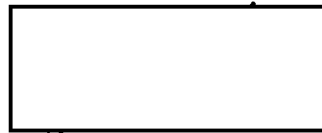
What role would the Soviet and Bloc personnel in Cuba play in such a situation?

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4. I am not aware of any ONE papers presently scheduled which would deal with these questions. I do not want to become known as the "man who went away that keeps coming back to dinner." We in SAS do hope, however, that you will find a suitable occasion in the near future to undertake a memorandum or a NIE, as you consider appropriate, which would deal with these three questions in a specific and direct manner. I am informed that these questions, particularly the latter, are relevant to national contingency planning as well as to our own operational planning.



Chief, SAS/Intel

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